Compliance

Politics, Sociability and the Constitution of Collective Life

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Abstract: What kind of phenomenon is it when ordinary people in the United Kingdom unexpectedly abide by government advice on social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, even anticipating constraints on their activities? These happenings demand that we engage anthropologically with *compliance* – acts or activities that conform, submit or adapt to rules or to the demands of others. At present, there is no 'anthropology of compliance'. Rather, the discipline has inherited traditions of thought about compliance – as a necessary aspect of sociability or a morally suspect complicity, demanding resistance. These assumptions remain unexamined, but profoundly shape anthropological scholarship. This introduction aims to show how and why compliance might be a useful heuristic for anthropology. We define compliance as *that set of means by which actors strive to accommodate themselves to others in their collective life*. We argue that this conception of compliance allows us to multiply the kinds of phenomena we can call 'political'. It allows us to think about the political constitution of 'radical' difference, but to avoid making people identical with their cultural or conceptual worlds. By showing what compliance is and how it operates in and on social life, we ought therefore to be able to recover *both* specific forms of suffering and inequality *and* the ways in which social lives are constitutively different.

Keywords: anthropology, compliance, COVID-19, collective life, social life, tyranny

Following rules, submitting to demands or requirements, and accommodating oneself to others has been a central feature of the lives of vast numbers of people in recent times. This is evidently true for people across the world, who have experienced a variety of restrictions on their daily activities as governments, health officials and supra-national organisations have grappled with the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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In the United Kingdom, citizens' positive response to restrictions on their movement and social contacts, first imposed on 23 March 2020, took the government, at least initially, by surprise. Government planning as late as the second week of March presumed that compliance with social distancing would be as low as 50 per cent, with only a marginal benefit (Freedman 2020: 71n73), and the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, voiced his concerns that restrictions would be undermined by 'behavioural fatigue' (Freedman 2020: 61). However, ordinary British people were unexpectedly willing for their lives to be locked down, to the extent that for many a functional lockdown was in place long before it was officially required. By 18 March, five days before a national lockdown was first imposed, traffic volumes in London had fallen by 40 per cent (Freedman 2020: 73n96) and organisations like the Football Association had already cancelled public events (Freedman 2020: 72n86). Although responses to restrictions have been and remain varied, there was evidently a kind of spontaneous willingness to adapt to the predicament of the pandemic. The sorts of restrictions that ordinary people adopted in their daily lives were also effective. Lawrence Freedman argues that 'changes in behaviour were having an effect well before 23 March [when lockdown restrictions were imposed], especially in London' (2020: 58). At least initially, public 'compliance' with restrictions was, evidently, not straightforwardly a response to rules, regulations or UK government guidance.[1]

In April 2021, the Office for National Statistics (2021) published a report, acknowledging that 'overall, compliance was high and many participants in the study had a good awareness of . . . government guidance . . . and of how the coronavirus spreads'. The guidance in question, 'hands, face, space', referred to vectors of viral transmission, namely from surfaces (hands and face) and as an aerosol (space). All of these vectors, and the rationales behind them, referred to modes of connection between people – the surfaces they touched, the physical contacts that they had with others, and the common air that they breathed. Restrictions, in turn, were designed to minimise these contacts and manage connections as a means of limiting viral spread. Regardless of whether people complied with the government's guidance, these restrictions therefore drew attention to the ways in which people were linked to one another. Similarly, the vicissitudes of the lockdown highlighted the significant role of newly christened 'key workers' in delivering food and goods, providing health and social care, and performing other important services. Such work in mediating and maintaining other aspects of social life rose to prominence and was recognised as

people turned out onto their doorsteps to 'clap for heroes' on Thursday evenings in honour of NHS workers, for example. These results suggest a popular awareness of the significance of social relations and their management as the stuff from which lives are built.

It is in this context that we raise the question of *compliance*. Compliance is a pregnant term in several respects. Its Latin root, *complire*, covers the senses of 'to fill up, fulfil, accomplish, complete'. The notion of compliance emerged in English in the seventeenth century as 'compleasance' or 'complaisance', clearly carrying the sense of obligation implicit in the Latin. Thomas Hobbes writes about compleasance in *Leviathan* (1909: 116–117, original emphasis), where it is discussed as 'A fifth Law of Nature: COMPLEASANCE: that is to say, *That every man strive to accommodate himselfe to the rest* . . . The observers of this Law, may be called SOCIABLE, . . . The contrary, *Stubborn*, *Insociable*, *Froward*, *Intractable*'. In Hobbes' terms, as in the context of the pandemic, compliance is a marker of sociability, an awareness of obligations or duties that aims towards *accommodation* with others. Compliance, in other words, suggests the activity of fitting oneself in relation to others for a particular mode of life, in contrast to the '*Stubborn*, *Insociable*, *Froward*' and '*Intractable*'.

Correspondingly, other near-contemporary usages make 'compliance' mean the ability to bend or physically fit another object, as a cork 'complies' with the neck of a bottle, and 'to comply' could also mean to weave or braid. This sense of physical accommodation is retained in the physical sciences, where compliance denotes 'the property of a body or substance of yielding to an applied force or of allowing a change to be made in its shape; also, the degree of yielding, measured by the displacement produced by a unit change in the force' (Oxford English Dictionary 2021). Compliance, in other words, indicates tractability, being able to live or work with others, or the capacity to fit, yield or take an impression (see also Milton 1667: 603).

From the time of its coining, however, compliance has carried other meanings. Around the time of the trial and subsequent execution of Charles I, John Milton wrote *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649a). He saw Charles I as a tyrant and was in favour of the formation of a republic. He begins his book with the following sentence: 'If Men within themselves would be govern'd by reason, and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyrannie, of Custome from without, and blind affections within, they would discerne better, what it is to favour and uphold the Tyrant of a Nation'. A few sentences later, he draws on the idea of compliance to highlight the passivity exercised

by 'bad' people in the face of tyranny: 'Consequentlie neither doe bad men hate Tirants, but have been alwaies readiest with the falsifi'd names of Loyalty and Obedience, to colour over their base compliances' (1649a: 1). In Milton's terms, compliance stood for falsity, sycophancy and surrender.

This morally questionable character of compliance was highlighted by later authors as well. Two centuries after Milton wrote, compliance was still being used pejoratively. In a speech that addresses local political issues in Boston, and what he sees as an ineffective array of appointed officials, the American abolitionist Wendell Phillips notes that '[a]ll politics necessitates questionable compliances; but this serfdom touches a base depth' (1863: 498). Similar ideas have been voiced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, London mayoral candidate Piers Corbyn was arrested in February 2021 in connection with a campaign flyer equating the United Kingdom's vaccination programme to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz (BBC News 2021). Such equations are typical of 'COVID-sceptical' politics. From this perspective, compliance with government policy would represent acquiesence in tyranny. 'Base' compliance, in other words, represents a potential failure of independent thought and action, a 'blind affection' robbing people of freedom and agency, instilling a morally questionable 'complicity'.

Compliance, then, suggests a series of issues for anthropologists. First, it raises questions around meaning. As Milton's 'base' compliance, it invites attention to politics, resistance and agency, especially as they concern the apparent moral value of subjects as independent agents. However, as Hobbes stresses in his account of compleasance as a 'fifth law of nature', people may also '*strive*' to be compliant. As such, compliance might itself be thought of as a project or activity of self-shaping (cf. Foucault 1994; Laidlaw 2014). Especially in this regard, compliance points to the quality of tractability in social life, the capacity of actors – human and perhaps also non-human – and their efforts to accommodate themselves to one another's demands in striving to become 'sociable' in Hobbes' terms. In connection with the surprising levels of compliance with COVID-19 restrictions in the United Kingdom, this leads us to approach compliance as an ethnographic question: who complies, how, and with what, exactly?

Anthropology and compliance

Beyond its topical relevance, thinking about compliance anthropologically is interesting because no generalised, contemporary anthropology of compliance exists. Compliance appears in the anthropological literature mainly in connection with medicine, tax and corporate affairs – all contexts in which compliance is a term used by the people anthropologists study, and which feature in several of the articles assembled here. There is very little contemporary anthropological material that focusses explicitly on, for example, why people follow the law,[2] or why juniors obey seniors in kinship relations, for example.[3] Compliance in a general sense has never become an important object of anthropological study. Our aim here is to argue that it should be, and to demonstrate its potential value.

The lack of an anthropology of compliance stands in stark contrast to psychology (famously, Milgram 1963). Psychologists have produced material on compliance in medical (e.g. Radley 1994) and business settings (e.g. Damayanti et al. 2015; Wenzel 2005), as anthropologists have. They have also considered sales strategies (e.g. Burger 1986; Cialdini et al. 1978), kinship (e.g. Sundie et al. 2012), survey responses (e.g. Petrova et al. 2007) and many other topics from the perspective of compliance. The range of contexts in which the term crops up in psychology indicates a key difference between the idea of compliance in that discipline and in anthropology: for psychologists, the question of what compliance is and what it does is generative, in the sense that pursuing it opens up insight and further lines of enquiry about many aspects of human social relations (e.g. Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Cialdini and Trost 1998), whereas anthropologists, as we argue below, have tended to take (non-)compliance for granted. Given that the question of how social relations work is equally relevant to both psychologists and anthropologists, why have anthropologists not adopted this standpoint?

An important reason for its neglect as an object of anthropological study is certainly the way in which compliance has been understood and evaluated as a relationship. Here again, Hobbes and Milton stand usefully for two poles of moral evaluation. For Hobbes, compliance is necessary for the conduct of social life; for Milton, by contrast, to comply is to lose a certain independence and, potentially, standing as a moral subject. Their different views of compliance are in turn traceable to judgements on the moral qualities of government and the state. Hobbes' argument in *Leviathan* is well known: the power of the

sovereign is required to guarantee a peaceful and orderly society; it exists by the transfer to the sovereign of individual people's rights and capacities, especially to employ violence. Hobbes' compliance is therefore readable as a legitimate limitation of individual agency. Milton's view opposes Hobbes' directly. In *Eikonoklastēs*, a tract composed for the Commonwealth government that ruled England after the execution of Charles I, and rebutting directly Charles' justification of his conduct before and during the Civil War, Milton contends:

> He [Charles I] confesses a rational sovrantie of soule and freedom of will in every man, and yet with an implicit repugnancy would have his reason the sovran of that sovranty, and would captivate and make useless that natural freedom of will in all other men but himself. But them that yeeld him this obedience he so well rewards, as to pronounce them worthy to be Slaves. They who have lost all to be his Subjects, may stoop and take up the reward. (Milton 1694b)

Milton and Hobbes thus both envisage compliance as a limitation of individual freedom and capacity to act; they differ only in their assessment of its value. For Hobbes, submission is necessary to the orderly Commonwealth, whereas for Milton it represents an illegitimate imposition.

These contrasting evaluations evidently map closely onto conventional and deep-rooted social scientific distinctions between structure and agency. Marshall Sahlins has argued (1996) that they also correspond to a deep mythic structure of Western European thought and culture, articulated in the narrative of the Fall of Man, which he suggests resonates through modern social thought. For Sahlins, the question of the value of individual free will arises from the Fall because it was Adam's wilful act of eating of the tree of knowledge that created want and scarcity. Freedom was therefore sinful for St Augustine (1998) and other early Christian thinkers, and to be minutely managed by spiritual directors given pastoral responsibility for their flock (Foucault 1995: 139ff; 2009). Compliance with such spiritual direction was the essence of virtue.

As Michel Foucault (2009) documents, the upheavals of the seventeenth century in Europe – exactly the period of Hobbes and Milton – saw 'pastoral' modes of control, derived from spiritual direction, extended from ecclesiastical affairs to secular matters. At the same time, free will was reimagined. It was no longer necessarily sinful, but a fact of life to be managed (Sahlins 1996: 398). This management was often modelled on the work of spiritual direction and the compliance of the penitent or disciple. It developed into forms of disciplinary practice

that sought order in timely and minutely choreographed movements (Foucault 1995; Mitchell 1988). From the late eighteenth century, emerging forms of discipline, applied to soldiers, factory workers and school children, aimed to order the placement and movements of the people they were applied to, rendering their activities transparent and accessible to analysis (Foucault 1995: 143). The purpose of these disciplines was to forge order out of chaos, much as scientists of the so-called 'classical age' sought to tabulate and order species of plants, animals and rocks (Foucault 1970). Compliance here shifts from religious virtue to social order and efficiency.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century an alternative line of thinking was developing, one which located social order differently and made different demands of the compliance–freedom dyad. In various disciplines, hidden, internal orders were discovered in the phenomena of the world which seemed to give them an internal, spontaneous order, above and beyond attempts to govern them (Foucault 1970). Capital and the 'invisible hand' (Smith 1999) of the market in economics serves, for Sahlins (1996), as the model for this tendency (see also Foucault 1970). From this point of view, as in Milton's earlier position, free will is inherently good, and the role of government is not to dominate it, as in pastoral discipline, but to liberate it. As Sahlins comments, this was original sin 'bourgeoisified' as 'rational choice', providing 'a more cheerful view of the material opportunities afforded by human suffering' (1996: 397). The moral loads of free will and compliance were thus reversed, and freedom as opposed to compliance (following 'tradition', for example) became the ultimate source of virtue.

Between these two poles of moral evaluation lies the problem for studying compliance anthropologically. Compliance and its relation to agency does not appear as a phenomenon to be studied, but as the foundational concept for different visions of social life. In the Miltonian idiom that runs through Smith and Milton Friedman, human freedom and agency are the prime movers of social life. People's freedom to act as consumers and investors produces the inherent and efficient logic of the market, which should be extended to all sorts of services (power, water, rail, education, welfare, child care 'choices', etc). In this tradition, arbitrary systems of control, such as that proposed by Hobbes,[4] should be limited to guaranteeing the 'natural' operations of markets, to which they should be subservient. Compliance with such systems of control is therefore suspect – the 'slavery' that Milton sees following submission to the King in *Eikonoklastēs* is evidently on Friedrich von Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (2007).

Conversely, Hobbes' vision of compliance and the limitation of freedom as the necessary price of order against chaos is obviously echoed in eighteenth-century French thought (Montesquieu 1989; Rousseau 1997). Early anthropology is likewise shot through with the notion, especially in speculations concerning the control of 'primitive promiscuity' and the development of regulated forms of marriage and kinship (Gluckman 1965 [provides a summary]; Maine 1977; Morgan 2000). The two streams join in Émile Durkheim's (1915) notion of the collective conscience and Marcel Mauss' (2002) account of the obligations of gift exchange, in which compliance serves, exactly as in Hobbes, to make people 'sociable' and thus to found society. For anthropologists who have inherited this intellectual history, compliance is a necessary component of social analysis, but, as we argue below, it is very difficult to bring into focus as an object of study.

Hobbesean anthropology

For a long time, anthropology operated in a Hobbesean mode, mediated by Durkheim. In the years 1894–1895, Durkheim gave a course of lectures on Hobbes' 1642 book, *De Cive*, originally written in Latin but translated into English in 1651 under the title *Philosophicall Rudiments Concerning Government and Society* (Hobbes 1978), which anticipates themes elaborated in *Leviathan*. The famous phrase *bellum omnium contra omnes* ('war of all against all') appeared first in *De Cive*. Hobbes was of interest to Durkheim because of the latter's abiding concern with the issue of 'social cohesion' (Eloire 2011).

Durkheim had published *The Division of Labour in Society* in 1893 (Durkheim 1984) and was working on *Rules of the Sociological Method*, ultimately published in 1895 (Durkheim 1938). He was concerned to place the then nascent discipline of sociology in historical and philosophical perspective. Durkheim saw in Hobbes' writing a way of scientifically understanding society and of providing an objective point of view on the social. For Durkheim, the fundamental rule of sociology was that social facts must be considered as things, and he understood Hobbes as applying this rule in his writing. But Durkheim also highlighted the contractarianism of Hobbes, which meant that he could not see that social facts had to be explained by other social facts and was confined to an individualistic reasoning.

According to Durkheim's interpretation of Hobbes, society is not a product of human nature. If the pre-social state of nature had existed,

chronic war would have resulted due to the natural equality of men, inhibiting their capacity to organise. Society is therefore the product of reason, obliging individuals together through mutually binding contracts. These inter-individual relations are, in turn, connected with another set of binding relations that unites each individual to recognised power through an independent allocation of rights. Hobbes' theory of the state is of an institution that is not natural but social. The question for Durkheim, then, was one of what relationships between 'social facts' would account for the form of society.

The anthropology that developed under Durkheim's influence, especially in Britain, was concerned with the orderliness or 'cohesion' of 'primitive societies' (Evans-Pritchard 1940), where order was understood as a necessary good (Strathern 1985). Primitive societies were interesting both because their orderliness was a surprise considering their 'savagery' (Malinowski 1926), and because it was thought that in examining the principles of their order, which were assumed to be restricted by their limited scale, a general theory of social life might be possible (Fortes 2017; Gluckman 1965). The problem was to find out what made order possible, necessary and enduring. Considering the various ways in which other people organised their social lives, it was evident, as Meyer Fortes observed, that 'social cohesion . . . is achieved by specific social mechanisms' (1936: 604), as Durkheim had argued.

Ultimately, the mechanisms of cohesion were to be found in accounts of 'custom' (Gluckman 1965) or, analogously, in rights and obligations defined by systems of descent and kinship (Fortes 2017). Societies were ordered – and ordered differently to one another – because they had different customs. Clearly, for customs to have the effect of producing distinctive social orders, people must comply with them. As Durkheim (1952) had already demonstrated, social regularities could be explained neither by exogenous factors such as climate, nor by individual choice, which would produce random and not regular effects. They were rather the product of people's compliance with exterior and compulsory norms (Durkheim 1938). As in Hobbes, sociability involved submission. Since compliance was a taken-for-granted mechanism in Durkheimian theories of society, it was not itself available for study. Even in legal anthropology, the reasons for which people comply and the means by which they are brought to do so were obscured or excluded from the purview of the discipline. 'Why an individual for emotional and intellectual reasons conforms to the code and discharges his obligations,' declared Max Gluckman, 'is a problem for psychologists' (1965: 202), and thus of no interest to anthropology.

The Miltonian turn

Even as Gluckman was writing, however, the ground was already shifting. Anthropology was taking a Miltonian turn, in which compliance would come to be seen as 'base,' morally questionable and academically uninteresting. In 1968, Edwin Ardener (2006) presented his paper 'Belief and the problem of women' at University College London. In it, he argued that 'custom' was understood differently by men and women, and that it mattered from whom anthropologists drew the information on which they based their models of social structure. Feminist anthropologists rapidly developed this and similar ideas, exploring the ways in which cultural and social systems operated not in the interests of cohesion, but as forms of patriarchal domination (Moore 1988 [provides a summary]; Ortner 1974; Rubin 1975; Strathern 1988).

At the same time, 'primitive societies' as the object of anthropological study and the sites of custom were also slipping away. Decolonisation meant that they could no longer be imagined as distinct from the 'modern' states that they were part of (e.g. Epstein 1981) and whose governments were often intolerant of 'tribalism' (Asad 1998). Likewise, scholars from the ex-colonies as well as the metropole were developing critical accounts of the violence of colonialism and the connections between knowledge – including anthropological knowledge – and colonial power (Fabian 1983; Robbins 2013; Said 2003). As in feminist accounts, the 'mechanisms of social cohesion' identified by Fortes and other structural-functional[5] anthropologists appeared, in the light of this scholarship, to be inextricably connected to colonialism – both as an instrument of power and a product of the colonial imagination. By the beginning of the 1990s, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) concluded that anthropology's location in the 'savage slot' was no longer tenable: 'primitive societies' bound by custom could not be the object of the discipline, or used in the interests of a Western study of social life in general.

Anthropology's response to these developments was halting and confused by the various lines of critique involved, which covered a gamut of issues from authorship to the mechanics of colonial power. However, Joel Robbins (2013) argues that the upshot of the turmoil of the period 1970–1990 was a shift of focus towards the subject and a retreat from the idea of structure (see Urla and Helepololei 2014). Robbins states: 'Anthropology was in the early 1990s changing its relation to those it studied from one of analytic distance and critical comparison

focused on difference to one of empathic connection and moral witnessing *based on human unity*' (2013: 453, emphasis added). Robbins argues that the universality of the human was established through a focus on suffering as a common experience, leading to anthropologists bearing compassionate witness to others as fellow people.

If people were everywhere the same, as evidenced in their capacity to suffer, then it followed that they had to be separable from the very different social and cultural circumstances under which they lived. The unity of humanity therefore tended to establish an oppositional relationship between people and the social and cultural systems they inhabited – one which in many respects echoes Gluckman's (1965) dismissal of the motives and interests of the subjects of anthropological study. Social life varied, but humanity was constant. Logically, then, this 'anthropology of the suffering subject' (Robbins 2013) was one that treated socio-cultural variation as an epiphenomenon to humanity, not constitutive of it.[6] As had been the case for Durkheim (1938), socio-cultural systems were *external* to human subjects, surrounding them as a constraining environment that they negotiated tactically (de Certeau 1984). Agency could be registered only against this background. Correspondingly, as in James Scott's (1990, 1998) influential work, human life as such, and especially the inner lives of subjects, came to be seen as inherently ungovernable and resistant to the systems that were imposed on people (see Mitchell 1990). Where local cultural lives were celebrated, these commonly took the form of a kind of resistant, everyday know-how or *mētis* (Dresch and Scheele 2015; Scott 1998), ranged against larger-scale or dominant systems of power. In this context, anthropologists sought out instances of 'everyday resistance' as evidence of the vitality and agency of their subjects (Abu-Lughod 1990). Resistance was the corollary of common humanity and the *Leitmotif* of a generation of anthropological work (Brown 1996; Ortner 1995, 1997).

The central place that resistance had achieved in anthropology by the 1990s has been extremely durable. This was partly the result of historical events – notably responses to the 2008 financial crash and the Arab Spring of 2011. In the aftermath of these events, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos suggests a retreat from the notion, but not very far:

> The concept of resistance was not that long ago a great source of inspiration for anthropology. More recently, however, anthropological interest has shifted to a variety of related topics: urban protest, insurrectionary movements, anti-austerity mobilization, and the increasing discontent with hegemonic economic policies. (Theodossopoulos 2014: 415–416)

Resistance remains close to the heart of the discipline. Lucas Bessire and David Bond define 'the progressive orientation of anthropology' in terms of 'located descriptions of resistance, suffering, and governance', in which the political consists in 'operations of domination' and 'struggles' (2014: 441) over goods, rights and the significance of things.

A focus on resistance makes it very difficult to focus on compliance. This is because of the way in which conventional, liberal notions of power and resistance distribute agency. Resistance and power, agency and domination, subject and object are opposed in a zero-sum fashion. To resist is to 'shed power,' to achieve 'emancipation' (Urla and Helepololei 2014: 433). To be dominated or fail to resist from this perspective appears as a loss of independent agency. Marilyn Strathern observes:

> Western culture imagines people as persons existing in a permanently subjective state; this is their natural and normal condition, and a person can dominate another by depriving him or her of the proper exercise of that subjectivity. . . Thus a . . . subject can be turned into an object. (Strathern 1988: 388)

As a result, an anthropology committed to defending and advocating for the people it studies finds it hard to talk about compliance. Compliant behaviour is liable to take the form of a background against which ethnographic subjects will appear by virtue of their *non*-compliance, resistance or subversion. Saba Mahmood (2001: 203), for example, observes that agency is viewed by feminist anthropologists especially as 'a synonym for resistance to relations of domination'. By this metric, people who do as they are told cannot be fully fledged agents or proper subjects – for themselves, or therefore for ethnography. Similarly, anthropologists began to frame the cultural and social systems they studied as rejoinders to modernity (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993), capitalism (e.g. Taussig 1980, 2002), or Western epistemology (Scott 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2015) in order to circumvent anthropology's tendency to distance and objectify its others as non-agents and non-subjects.

The echoes of Milton in anthropology's turn towards resistance by way of common humanity are unmistakeable. Whereas for scholars like Fortes, following Hobbes, compliance with custom was assumed as the necessary basis of orderly social life, by the end of the 1990s, the polarities of anthropological scholarship had been reversed. Compliance was no longer a 'problem for psychologists' but the 'base' symptom of domination, the background against which political agency took shape and from which it had to be recovered. It was, however, no more accessible to study, since the unity of humanity, predicated on subjectivity

and agency, defined in advance the relation between compliance and resistance (Holbraad 2014; Mitchell 1990).

Making compliance interesting

Our contention in this introduction is that, the history outlined above notwithstanding, anthropologists should be interested in compliance. In their introduction to *Times of Security*, Morten Pedersen and Martin Holbraad argue that all anthropology is, in one way or another, concerned with security, which they define as 'a set of discourses and practices concerned with a given social collective's reproduction over time' (2013: 9, emphasis removed). For them, security is synonymous with the enduring character of social and cultural systems, and the means by which they endure. Pedersen and Holbraad's argument is in many ways analogous with the one presented here. They suggest that anthropologists have been unable to focus on security as an object because the conceptual framework within which they operate defines the relations that constitute security in advance. This relegates security to the analytical background.

Taking Hobbes as a model, we could equally argue that all anthropology is centrally concerned with compliance as *that set of means by which actors strive to accommodate themselves to others in their collective life*, recognising with Hobbes that such accommodation is the basic meaning of sociability and the condition of association. Compliance in this sense is implicit in both the 'Hobbesean' and 'Miltonian' versions of anthropology outlined above as the unexplored mechanism of custom and the background for resistance and agency, respectively. However, the relation that compliance names – one of subjection and the absence of freedom – has historically been taken for granted by anthropologists. 'Society', both as a benign 'social system' and as a system of oppression, dominates its members.

Pedersen and Holbraad's prescription for bringing security into focus is to attend in each ethnographic case to the nature of the social collective in question and the way in which that collective constitutes the definite time in which it reproduces itself. What, in other words, is being reproduced and how does that reproduction constitute the time in which it endures? To shift anthropological attention to compliance, we suggest a similar strategy. Who exactly are the *actors* which strive to accommodate themselves to others, how are they constituted as such?[7] By what means or agencies and in which media do they *strive* and how

is this striving registered or rendered visible? What is the *collective life* in question – what is associated to constitute it and by what forms of *accommodation*? To pose questions around compliance in this way is to recuperate some of the generative potential that the notion has in psychology, to make compliance central to anthropological accounts of collective life.

Framed like this, these questions are evidently interlinked. To ask about personhood is at once to raise the question both of what people do to relate to one another, their 'striving', and thus also to bring into view their collective life.[8] Anna Berglund (this issue; 2019) clearly addresses this concern in her discussion of rural Rwandans' compliance with government agricultural policies. These policies, which have often been harshly enforced (Ansoms and Cioffo 2018), have caused peasants' crop yields to decline, resulting in shortages of food and declining standards of living. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Malay peasants described by Scott (1985, 1987), they complied as far as they were able with policy demands (cf. Palmer 2014). Berglund argues that her interlocutors' compliance was not the result of their very real powerlessness, but a reflection of the ways in which villagers' ideas, values and practices overlapped with oppressive state projects. Villagers understood themselves as poor people – a condition of moral inferiority and shame as well as material want. Compliance with state policy, for them, was not an imposition, despite the fact that it ran counter to their material interests. Rather, it represented an opportunity to engage with a transformative project through which they could create a position for themselves as people of value in a larger community. This notion of the poor person is ethnographically specific – it is not generalisable as Robbins' (2013) 'suffering subject' – and conditions relations of compliance. At the same time, it serves to account for the apparently counter-intuitive way in which rural Rwandans work with a government that works against them – that is, the mode of their 'striving' to relate to others. In the process, the analysis serves to map out crucial relations constituting Rwandan social life more broadly, especially between the rural majority and the powerful and often overbearing apparatus of government (Thomson 2018), without collapsing into ready-made tropes of oppression.

Similarly, to think about the media and agencies through which relations of compliance operate demands that we engage with the persons who are assumed, conditioned, given capacities and connected through compliance – and through accounting for such connections, again, to approach a characterisation of collective life as a whole. Jonathan Stadler's contribution to this issue is focussed exactly on the media of

compliance in clinical trials. His essay concerns a 'smart pill box' called a Medication Event Reminder Monitoring (MERM) device, which is designed to improve compliance with a new TB prophylaxis regime in a South African township. The MERM was a pill container equipped with a microchip. It recorded when it was opened and issued reminders to patients to take medication. Stadler argues that the MERM served to facilitate compliance with the testing regimen, and that the device itself became a focus of attention during the trial. But it also had the effect of constituting patients as persons in multiple ways. For clinicians, it established patients as unreliable, forgetful and dishonest, even as it worked to control these tendencies in them. Patients, in their relations with the MERM device, endowed it with humanness, drawing attention to their own suffering and need for care. In turn, the MERM provided divergent perspectives on collective life as a whole. For the medics running the trial, its technical emphasis on ensuring patients remembered their medication and on preventing their lying about taking it made the political economics of TB and HIV – which are closely connected with poverty – invisible. Conversely, for patients, the MERM, as a quasi-human offering a kind of care, reflected local awareness of inequality and constructs of TB as a disease of poverty and pollution.

Seen as an association or accommodation, collective life as a whole can be specified in terms of compliance: the things and people it associates, the nature of the connections between them, and the ways in which these connections are rendered visible or registered (cf. Latour 2005). Although none of the articles in this issue attempt such a totalising perspective, Lotta Björklund Larsen and Benedicte Brøgger's contribution is emblematic in these terms. They examine tax compliance policy and practice pertaining to Multi-National Enterprises (MNEs), a fraught and contentious area of policy. Their focus is on 'co-operative compliance' regimes in Norway and Sweden that are underpinned by OECD tax compliance methodologies. These schemes are intended to engage large MNEs with the aim of increasing compliance. Although these Norwegian and Swedish schemes are based on the same OECD template and exist in very similar political and fiscal contexts, Larsen and Brøgger demonstrate that they operated very differently. The source of this difference, they show, lies in the way in which compliance with tax implicates history, culture, institutions and systems of regulation. Crucially, compliance in these cases both conditions and is conditioned by relations between corporate executives and government tax administrators, and affects the obligations and responsibilities imagined between taxpayers and society at large. These diverse factors

do not only bear on compliance, but are mobilised in the ways in which MNEs do and do not comply, such that they are made visible and activated in the construction of social life. This case suggests how the accommodations that compliance entails create the associations that constitute collective life.[9]

Assembling the political

Attending to compliance in this way therefore offers a vantage point from which to generate a picture of collective life. Of course, this is not the only way in which this might be done. All anthropological theories – all social theories, for that matter – aim to model social life in some way. To be compelling, a case for an anthropology of compliance needs to demonstrate that the concept does intellectual work in an efficient way, that it is a useful heuristic (Candea 2019).

Part of the justification for attending to compliance must be topical. Compliance as we have set the notion out here seems to offer an effective engagement with the interlinked crises of the environment, politics and health that mark the contemporary era (Latour 2017, 2018). At the time of writing, it is difficult to say with any certainty what, if any, lasting impact the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic will have on anthropology. However, the early indications are that it is prompting renewed interest in interconnections, networks and the co-construction of persons, agencies and bodies (e.g. Briggs 2020; Faas et al. 2020; Hardy 2020; Higgins et al. 2020; Kirksey 2020) of the kind often studied by anthropologists of multi-species engagement and the Anthropocene (Kirksey 2014; Kohn 2007; Tsing 2017), or those influenced by Actor–Network Theory (ANT) and the 'sociology of associations' promoted by Bruno Latour (2005). Anthropology, in other words, seems to be responding to a widely distributed sense of the cardinal significance of relations of all kinds – with both human and non-human entities – to the business of life, and of the responsibilities that these connections imply.

Such approaches, however, are often criticised for neglecting politics, especially the kinds of political struggles commonly identified with a paradigm of anthropology focussed (albeit in different ways) on resistance (Bessire and Bond 2014; Gregory 2014; Hornborg 2017a, 2017b; Kipnis 2015; Martin 2014). Latour (2004, 2005) rejects this critique, arguing that the work of association, since it forms collectivities and the capacities of actors, is inherently political (see also Haraway 2016). Latour's (2005) objections to critical sociologists' (and by extension an-

thropologists') 'discovery' of ready-made mechanisms of power, oppression and resistance operating under the surface of collective life are well founded. However, it also seems to be the case that the breadth of the notion of politics he proposes means that he fails to engage directly with the kind of 'politics' his critics are pointing to, namely contests over meanings, rights and values undertaken discursively in a public space (cf. Habermas 2011). There is room to doubt whether that anthropocentric vision of politics is exhaustive (de la Cadena 2010), but it is certainly significant.

Compliance invites us to attend to how and to what extent people strive to accommodate themselves to one another in collective life. Our case is that the people and other actors involved in relations of compliance are to an important extent brought into being by the ways in which they comply or fail to do so, along with the means by which they relate to one another and thus the whole of collective life. This perspective offers to bring the straightforwardly 'political' (public, discursive, concerned with policy) into an anthropology focussed on relationships and the constitution of diverse forms of life. It does this by demonstrating the ways in which the government of people, their mobilisation in response to demands, rules or requirements, is variable beyond the limits of taken-for-granted relations of domination or submission.

Steven Sampson's article in this issue (see also Sampson 2016), which focusses on corporate compliance and ethics departments, effectively demonstrates the possibility of the concept of compliance we have articulated. Since the 2000s, almost all major corporations and large numbers of public agencies have established ethics and compliance departments. This development is the product of the politics of corporate governance, especially in the United States – an area of policy that surged to prominence in the wake of the 2001 Enron scandal, the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers and the resulting financial crisis, and more recent examples of corporate wrongdoing, such as the 2014 Volkswagen emissions scandal. Business ethics is not new, as Sampson (2016) points out, although calls for ethical business, and against 'amoral' (or 'immoral') markets, always *seem* new as political debates swirl around the question of to whom, exactly, firms should be beholden. The growth of corporate compliance departments is novel, however, in the sense that they respond to states' attempts to legislate for ethical business and, sometimes, to enforce those regulations.

So far, so political: public debate over the meaning and value of corporate action leads to rules that seek to define rights and obligations, and to distribute the costs and benefits of firms' actions. However, the

details of corporate compliance programmes that Sampson describes reveal the relational assemblage (Ong and Collier 2005) *through which this politics of corporate capitalism is actuated*. This assemblage, or 'package' in Sampson's terms, is focussed on embedding legal and ethical behaviour as part of the business activities of corporations, an internalisation of ethics, and not merely a constraint. This is achieved by corporations, in partnership with a vast supporting industry that has grown up around ethics and compliance initiatives, through strategies of communication. These directly affect employees, who are trained in ethical behaviour, since unethical activity is understood as the result of defective training. Since corporate compliance is ideally transparent and demonstrable from outside the corporation, a corporation's ethics must also be communicated to shareholders and a public of 'stakeholders' more broadly. This activity involves the production of codes of conduct, training courses, and auditable trails of activity, which include the production and staffing of ethics departments, as well as the modification of corporate activity to accommodate it to laws and regulations, and to notions of the corporation's place within a larger moral community. Modern capitalism, Sampson observes 'is constructing its own morality, with its own theory of human agency' (2016: 84). Here, as in the other contributions to this collection, 'politics', seen through the lens of compliance, takes the form of an assemblage or network formed by people's activity in striving to accommodate themselves to one another and in the process constituting themselves and their collective life.

Sincerity, suffering and difference

A politics imagined in the specific, situated form of compliance transcends the opposition between Hobbes and Milton by engaging not with moral questions about the value of compliance, but by engaging with what compliance is and does. Thinking about compliance in this way – that is, ethnographically – and placing it at the centre of the analysis allows us to think about 'politics' as plural: it invites a vision of politics as *more than one type of phenomenon*.

The potential multiplicity of politics is implicit in an ethnographic attention to compliance as we have laid it out here, because the relations that it entails cannot straightforwardly be reduced to the questions of power and submission that exercised Hobbes and Milton, and which have haunted anthropology. Rather, it is necessary to specify for each case the kinds of actors who are brought to comply, or not; the relations

and media in which they do so; and the collective that they are part of. Such an analysis also precludes taking relations of power as an obviously moral or ethical issue, as scholars of resistance tend to do. In the framework we propose here, terms such as 'politics', 'power' and 'compliance' must be treated in the first instance as heuristics, pointing out family resemblances amongst observed effects, whose precise dimensions and value remain to be specified.

Such a perspective is implicit in Isak Niehaus' article in this issue. In it, he examines a public lecture entitled 'Savages Have No Crime', which was delivered by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown at Columbia University, where he was a visiting professor, in 1931. The lecture was given in a political environment that in many ways embodied the dispute between Hobbes and Milton, between orderly society and individual freedom. At the time, prohibition was in force, and gangsterism was surging across the United States. Although subsequently forgotten, Radcliffe-Brown's lecture caught the attention of the local press at the time. Niehaus examines its implications for understanding Radcliffe-Brown's thought, but more significant for the current argument is the subtext of the lecture, which appears to have been what caught the attention of journalists. Niehaus reads Radcliffe-Brown as issuing a critique of Western politics and criminal law, both in the United States and in the British Empire. For Radcliffe-Brown, oppressive laws and criminal sanctions are only necessary because of the particular constitution of Western social life, and represent an inherently unjust imposition when applied elsewhere. The injustice stems from the fact that, as Radcliffe-Brown sees it, persons, as social entities and subjects of 'law', are socially produced. The powers that they answer to, and the kinds of compliance they can be brought to, are therefore emanations of their particular forms of life, not universal or necessary traits of social life. By the same token, the oppressions and constraints of the prohibition era did not represent a necessary morality, but the product of a specific social order.

Approaches like this have a long history in anthropology. Bronisław Malinowski (1945), like Radcliffe-Brown, was of the view that subjecting 'savages' to European law was unjustified, while almost four decades after Radcliffe-Brown's lecture, Peter Lawrence (1969) voiced his concerns about the imposition of European legal systems in Papua New Guinea (see Demian and Rousseau 2019). Like Radcliffe-Brown, Lawrence was concerned with the suitability of law to a different form of personhood and social life. 'It is inevitable,' he wrote, 'that, unless New Guinea society is changed so that the citizen-isolate replaces the

kinsman or clansman, Australian Law . . . cannot function effectively in the country' (1969: 35).

While anthropologists working broadly in the British school worried about the mismatch between European ideas about political order and local social structures, more radical voices were exploring the possibility that political life could have entirely different purposes and possibilities to those ascribed to it in the West. Pierre Clastres' (1987) *Society against the State* is probably the best known of this genre, and argues that Indigenous lowland Latin American societies are organised to prevent the establishment of institutionalised forms of domination. His ideas were enthusiastically adopted by Trotskyist thinkers attached to the Socialisme ou Barbarie group of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, who used them as a basis to reimagine socialist politics after they became disillusioned with the Soviet Union (Cova and Sarmiento Barletti 2021).

These two concerns with the cultural variability of politics – that societies are self-determining and that other peoples' lives might hold radical possibilities – form the basis of the 'ontological' approach in anthropology championed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004). For Viveiros de Castro (2015), following Clastres and Gilles Deleuze, another thinker influenced by Clastres (Cova and Sarmiento Barletti 2021), anthropology's role is to establish a 'permanent revolution' in thought. This revolution consists in confronting Western epistemology with versions of the world that it cannot digest (Candea 2019), much as Clastres' account of a politics that is not about power upends Western preconceptions of the meaning of either term. These alternate worlds are imagined as 'ontologies' – that is, as conceptual systems defining their own reality, which are of equal status to Western notions of reality or nature. This establishes a kind of politics founded on difference itself, where the double meaning of 'to differ' – to be different and to disagree – is exploited as the essence of political engagement (Holbraad et al. 2014). In Viveiros de Castro's thinking, the crucial political relationship is therefore not a disagreement, over the meaning, values or rights of some definite thing or person, but a radical uncertainty or 'equivocation' about the nature of the thing at stake.

This perspective is diametrically opposed to the anthropology of the 'suffering subject' that Robbins (2013) outlines. This imagines a politics concerned with the common struggles of *humans*, organised around power, resistance and suffering. Politics in Viveiros de Castro's account, by contrast, involves diverse contentions amongst people, who are categorically not 'all of the same type', over the nature of diverse

worlds. If the 'suffering subject' defines an anthropology of inequality, this ontological approach is one founded on alterity. By the same token, in this 'ontological' approach, social and cultural systems do not appear to be exterior and regulating in relation to human subjects, but constitutive of them and their worlds. These worlds equally define the forms of politics appropriate to them, rendering politics multiple. As a result, it becomes 'illegal', in Viveiros de Castro's (2015) terms, to suggest – or to look for – any kind of slippage between what people say they do, or what is required of them, and what they actually do (Holbraad 2014).

Compliance as an idea, however, *requires* the possibility of slippage. For someone to comply, there can be no such identity between people and the rules that they follow; compliance must involve the possibility of failure. Thus, Sampson, in this issue, draws attention to a recurrent question concerning corporate compliance regimes: are they genuine efforts to 'do the right thing', or simply façades to improve firms' reputations? (see also Bolten 2016). Indeed, he argues that part of the role of a corporate compliance department is to determine where corporations need sincerely to comply with norms or regulations, and where pretence is sufficient. Politics, in other words, is rendered multiple by focussing on the processes and networks of compliance, but it is not thereby rendered an automatic or logically necessary effect of social or conceptual systems.

In this regard, our notion of compliance bears a relationship to Charles Taylor's (1999) reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1974) discussion of following rules. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Taylor is sharply critical of models of rule-following that imply that it is either necessary and automatic, as in structural accounts of social life, or based on an intellectual grasp of the rule and its relation to the situations in which it might be applied, as Viveiros de Castro's approach tends to imply (cf. Bourdieu 1977). He argues rather that rule-following is a kind of 'dialogical' activity in which agency is distributed in a relationship (cf. Strathern 1988). This relationship is mediated by tacit understandings of the situation and its demands, the 'rhythms' of the exchanges that it involves (Garfinkel 1988; Schram 2018). His model for such relationships, as in Larsen and Brøgger's article in this issue, is dancing – and one can, of course, dance well or badly. Having two left feet signals the possible failure of compliance and the limits of making politics multiple by appealing to the 'ontologies' or cultures of groups of people. It is not who one is or where one comes from (Amazonia or Melanesia, for example) – in other words a social or conceptual system 'at a higher level' – that makes politics multiple and problematic. Rather, it is what

people do in the business of striving to accommodate themselves to one another – an activity that also forms them and their collective life while allowing for the ethnographically specific struggles, strategies and sufferings that the contributors to this issue highlight.

Conclusion

We began this introduction by raising the question of the surprising popular compliance with restrictions on everyday life aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom. We argued that this problem of compliance, although pressing, is one that, as a result of its particular intellectual history, anthropology has had difficulty in bringing into focus. Compliance appeared either as a necessary condition of social analysis, or as an unremarked background against which to see human agency.

In order to make compliance accessible to anthropologists as an object of study, we proposed heuristically to define the term as *that set of means by which actors strive to accommodate themselves to others in their collective life*. We argued that this definition raises three interlinked questions: who are the actors concerned, by what means do they strive, and what is the nature of the collective constituted by their accommodation? The answers to these questions are interlinked, such that asking about any aspect of compliance will call upon the others. Compliance is an optic through which to envisage collective life as a whole. Understanding how and why people complied with lockdown restrictions, therefore, is neither a matter of reading off British 'culture' or 'society' or the 'political context' in order to interpret what transpired. Nor is it a question, necessarily, of power imposed on people who are exterior to it. Rather, the ways in which people imagined themselves as susceptible to the disease (or not), their relationships to one another, the things that they had at their disposal (or not) to protect themselves and the use (or not) of these things and the wider network of employment, neighbourhood, newspaper readership, government and so on that made up their lives must all be mobilised to account for what they did. Or, to put it another way, compliance need neither be automatic, nor a background condition: tracing the *set of means by which actors strive to accommodate themselves to others in their collective life* is itself to delineate people, activity and collectivity, and the way in which these unfold in time.

The value of this approach lies in its moderation. While it is clearly of a piece with relational, multi-species and ANT-inspired analyses, it engages squarely with a straightforward kind of politics that concerns policy, government and the management of populations. It is not, in other words, rooted in a singular and universal human subject, but nor does it bypass conventional understandings of politics. Responses to COVID-19 in the United Kingdom were evidently political – and often party political to boot – but the subjects of that politics were modified by the presence of a dangerous airborne virus that, amongst other effects, drew attention to the common atmosphere they breathed. Perhaps for the first time, British politics took place *in the air*.

As a result, mapping the specificity of particular compliances will inevitably serve to pluralise politics, to make politics about something other than ready-made notions of power or interest. This differentiation does not, however, compel us to think in terms of radical difference, or of whole communities of people or 'ontologies' that are irreducibly different from our own. Rather, it is a differentiation that is produced in practice by *people striving to accommodate themselves to others in their collective life*. These are strivings that are potentially connected, just as British people in 2020 almost certainly looked to Italy, Spain and China for their responses to the pandemic, just as their actions were ultimately connected to the international spread of the virus itself. They can also be seen to be unequal – not least in the difference in mortality rates between white and black Britons, or between wealthy and relatively poor people. By showing what compliance is and how it operates in and on social life, we ought therefore to be able to recover *both* specific forms of suffering and inequality *and* the ways in which social lives are constitutively different.

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Notes

1. There is more than a slight suggestion, which Freedman acknowledges, that UK citizens were complying with their understanding of other governments' restrictions, since the then more stringent regulations in force in Italy and elsewhere were widely reported. By March 2020, a large amount of information about the virus, its behaviour, and measures taken against it in other countries was widely available.

2. Legal scholars have addressed questions of compliance under the rubric of legal consciousness studies (Ewick and Silbey 1991; Halliday and Morgan 2013; Silbey 2005).

3. Such relationships can easily be accounted for in terms of 'power', of course. Explanations that are based on *implicit* rather than observed forms of coercion – as in Max Weber's notion of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence – obscure as much as they reveal, however. Power tends to stand in for or obviate the actual relations that constitute compliance.

4. For Foucault (1991, 2009), of course, this distinction is more apparent than real at an operational level. He shows how the 'governmentality' of modern states is intimately linked to disciplinary regimes of the classical period. Here, we mean only to point to a contrast in the explicit evaluation of compliance between these two schools of thought, which, since Milton and Hobbes were contemporaries, evidently transcends periodisation.

5. Fortes (2017) refers to himself as a structural anthropologist. Similar issues apply to French structuralism also (see Rubin 1975).

6. It is notable that Foucault, who as a theorist does insist on the constitutive role of social relations of power in the constitution of human subjects, is commonly understood by anthropologists mainly in terms of his earlier work as a theorist of institutions (Mahmood 2001), and not in light of his later writings on sexuality and ethics (Foucault 1994; Laidlaw 2002, 2014).

7. 'Actors' in this context are to be understood as *things that do something* (de Vries 2016), and not only as bounded, human agents. We use this terminology to disrupt the assumption that compliance must necessarily involve a relationship between human individuals and exterior powers or forces but might take shape in any kind of relationship between things (including, but not limited to, people). The point here is to maintain compliance as a question, rather than a known phenomenon, 'not to decide who is acting and how but to shift from a certainty about action to an *uncertainty* about action' (Latour 2005: 60).

8. The implicit similarity between this framework and Roy Wagner's (1972, 1986) 'obviation sequence' is more than incidental. Each of the questions we propose 'obviates' the others, acting as a point from which an image of the collective as a whole can be generated (see also Bateson 1958).

9. The term 'associations' is borrowed from Latour (2005). He uses it to designate the relationships that constitute collective life, but which are not necessarily 'social' because they involve non-human actors. Latour reserves the idea of social relations for what circulates within this hybrid human and non-human milieu. This perspective is evidently similar to Garfinkel's (1996) ethnomethodology. It also bears a strong relationship to Gabriel Tarde's sociology as adopted by Latour (2005; see also de Vries 2016) and Candea (2010).

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